

PETTY ADVENTURE AND GREAT

BY WINFRED RHOADES

BR-R-R-R-! went the drum. Toot! toot-a-toot! went the horn. And Sammy stopped to look. It was only a scrubby little band, out to herald a sorry little show, but Sammy's feet were stuck fast until the seductive thing had gone by. In the middle of the next block the lure was a throng in front of a newspaper office where magaphone announcements were being made, and a score was being chalked up on a big board. A little farther on it was the sight of a man displaying mechanical toys on the edge of the sidewalk that halted Sammy's steps. Next it was the enticement of a bakeshop window.

And so it went all down the street until a sudden clangor from a steeple clock rent the air. Then, startled into real action at last, Sammy began to run. But when he reached the railway station, breathless and with legs all a-tremble because of the mad pace at which he had sprinted, the engine bell was dinging its last ding in the distance, and some swirling dust was about all that Sammy could see of the train vanishing beyond the end of the platform.

He had lost his great day. For momentary whimwhams he had tossed away the ecstatic surprises his uncle had planned, the thrilling stories his uncle would have told, the enchanting companionship his uncle would have given. And worse! He had lost—though he knew it not—the great results that afternoon's excursion would have had. For it would have changed all his future, and made his life a far more interesting thing, and a far more significant, than it ever became.

Sammy is grown up now, but he is still the same. He takes no interest in anything beyond the end of his nose. He shuts in the eyes of his mind and soul to short horizons and paltry

visions. He trifles with what really matters, and lets the petty ensnare his feet. He gives himself to mean adventure instead of to great. He yields his time to the tinsel trivialities that are always clamorous, he rattles his tongue over the vapid phrases of the moment's vogue, he uglifies himself in accordance with the sartorial comicality of the hour, he cultivates no ideal beyond that of being a machine-made man, a standardized duplication of what he sees about him. If commercialized sport is, in the eyes of his crowd, a more weighty matter than the League of Nations or the rate of democracy, so it is to him also. Instead of eagerly seeking splendid enlightenments and lifting himself up to great-minded and great-hearted contacts, he gives himself to be a conformer in the world, which too often means being a deformer of the world. Deep human understanding and the spirit of magnanimous friendliness—these things are to him of small consequence as compared with the *Me*, *Mine*, and *Now* for which he continually pushes. Never does he give himself the excitement of an ardor for science, or beauty, or the welfare of those who fare not well, or the great thoughts the mind can rise up to, or the possibilities of his own soul.

It is easy to be little. You let yourself run with the crowd. You immerge yourself in a daily round of futile twitterings and bootless doings. You yield to the siren voices that continually call, "Oh, you *must* do this!" or, "You *must* read that!" You persuade yourself that you are thinking when really you are nothing but the echo of an echo. You suffer the crowd to determine the spending of your money, the use of your precious time, the affections of your heart, the destiny of your soul.

The value of life comes not so. It comes from daring—and caring—to turn away from fiddle-faddle, and to set out upon high adventure: lone adventure if need be at first. From earliest times each better form of existence, whether physical or spiritual, personal or collective, has come into being because some lower form has dared put its trust in some quality, some power, that the previous life upon earth had not dared to trust. The result—and the history of the world is witness to this—has justified the abandonment of the lower and the trust in the higher. The keynote of history is adventure. Whatever progress the world has made, whatever progress man has made since his advent in the world, has come about because the call to adventure has been listened to, and because with that the level of daring has continually been

raised. The principle is just as true now as ever it was in all time. Whatever progress shall yet be made by the world or by any individual one of us developing humans will come as the result of adventuring, and of daring to raise the level of adventuring to its highest possible point, whether it be adventuring with body, mind, heart, or spirit.

Sammy thinks that by talking about his investments, or about the prominent people with whom he has acquaintance, or about the offices he has held, or about the places to which he has travelled, he makes himself seem desirable to this individual or that group that he has an eye to. And so he strives and strains to make an impression. It is a pitiful sort of upside-downness. Dimension of soul is what makes a man worth knowing: not fortune nor dress nor station nor power, but bigness of the intrinsic self—a mind that is interesting, judgments that are sound, speech that is creatively suggestive, a heart that holds the entire world in its capacious lovingness, a soul that has height and depth and length and breadth, a spirit that is really alive. If there is in a man something that is finely impressive, it will be discovered without any straining on his part. And that is really what the world is ever looking for, and ever responsive to, notwithstanding its seeming preoccupation with littleness.

Mere contact with marvels—and we can easily fill our years with that—does not of itself make for life that is worth the living. Fierce gyration day after day and night after night is more likely to result as in that farm machine called a separator, and drive all the cream out of life. To not a few of us that is the sobering question that the soul of the universe puts: Are you living, or only gyrating? “And therefore swink and sweat”—I like the vividness of that fourteenth-century *Cloud of Unknowing*—“and therefore swink and sweat in all that thou canst and mayest, for to get thee a true knowing and a feeling of thyself as thou art.”

“Poor Cousin Maud! I wonder when she stopped growing!” writes an old lady in a letter; and adds: “I wonder if that is a disease that anybody can foresee, and forestall!” The writer of the letter is several years older than the person of whom she speaks, but at eighty-three she is more of a woman than she was at forty-three. She thinks bigger thoughts. She reads bigger books. She bears heavy burdens more constructively, and with cheerfulness unknown at middle life. People remark about her being so interesting. But Cousin Maud! It was a good many

years ago that she stopped growing. Content with her small interests and small ways, she had no thought that further growth was either possible or desirable.

It is *self*-limitation from which we suffer. "We must pity minds that do not eat quite as much as stomachs", wrote Victor Hugo. The higher values and greater satisfactions of life are those which we, infatuated, suffer to be crowded out. Is it not indeed pitiful to see a man whose life has a length of seventy years, but a breadth of only twenty and a height of only ten? On the other hand, what is finer than to see a man or woman, approaching the end of life, who has never ceased to grow, never ceased to make his mind more comprehensive, his judgments more generous, his dealings with his fellows more helpful, his heart more hospitable, his relations with God more vital, more dear, more enlarging, more filled with a great confidence and a great joy? As long as he lives he tries to lengthen the line of his achievements. Never does he shut his heart to the desire for new and brave adventure. He begins to paint pictures after he is fifty, he begins to write novels after he is sixty, he comes back to life and activity and makes his business greater than ever after he is seventy, he takes up a new language after he is eighty, he continues to write for the press after he is ninety. (I speak of those I have known personally or know about.) He tries to add also to his breadth-dimension, seeking more knowledge of more things, making his heart more roomy to take in the people of China, the people of the Balkans, the people of India, the men and women and boys and girls who live around the corner in crowds and dirt, the men in the prison just across the river, and troubled people and suffering people and brave aspiring people wherever they are to be found. And knowing that his long, hard education can never cease until he has acquired height and depth as well as length and breadth, he tries ever more eagerly as the years go by to open his mind wide to the mind of God and his spirit to the Spirit of God, to lift himself up to illustrious stature of soul.

But intercourse with great spirits whether through personal contact or through books, the solace and inspiration of true friendship, the pursuit of that which is true and beautiful in thought and soul and in the expression of thought and soul—such things as these, things that make for the soul's enlarging, demand the consecration of time. The world is now acquiring, because of the increase of machinery and the organization of industry, a leisure

such as has never been known before. We must not permit that leisure to lead to the thinning of life and decrease in the stature of the soul.

It ought not to be that the world stands amazed more often before the marvel of men's machines, and men's activities, than before the marvel of men's souls. The passing on of knowledge is only the lesser part of any teacher's work. His more urgent task is to stir up in the young things that come to his classroom a longing to develop a Self that shall be worth the possessing, and a high vision of what such a Self would be. The first business of the educator is to create in his pupils some beginning of hunger for an enriched mind, wise and enlarged sympathies, a judgment that has worth, and a beautified personality. His special task is to stimulate those whom he touches so that their spirit shall become one that reaches out always after life's greater meanings and values, and makes their daily contacts with their fellows creative in their nature. By the possession of things such as those a man's life is made a thing of moment, and becomes filled with a joy not otherwise known. And, as in the larger sense all of us are teachers willy-nilly all the while, no one of us can rightly live until an energy like that of the true educator's goes forth from his own daily living.

There is a procreant power in true greatness of soul, which begets in the souls that meet that greatness a vision of something similar in themselves. Suddenly they find a new thing struggling for life within them: a desire to make their dealings with their fellow men more deeply honorable: and with that a desire to do this other and harder thing also: to make their dealings with themselves continually and splendidly honorable. Then they begin to set themselves free from the tyranny of phrases, and to aspire after reality whether in conduct or in character or in knowledge or in religion. People talk about a warm heart or a cold intellect. But why *either-or*? Is the mind, any less than the heart, an expression of the Eternal Spirit? A rightly disciplined mind is not a cold thing. It is flaming hot, and adds to the power of an eager, glowing heart, passionate to pour itself out upon all needy creation. Men and women who are able to think have a duty to think. With high integrity are they called to think, for the sake of souls. With the good doctor of the *Religio Medici*, who says, "I make . . . not my head a grave, but a treasure, of knowledge; I intend no Monopoly, but a community, in learning; I study not for my

own sake only, but for theirs that study not for themselves,"—so are they called to use the mind for love's sake and life's sake.

One longs always for the beautiful things that the world makes possible. But ever increasingly, as the years go by, one finds himself more hungrily longing for those fundamental sincerities and greatnesses in the inmost being that make for the enduring worth and greatness of the soul itself. One would have honesty and a fine bigness in all thinking about daily demands and problems. The maintaining of a high rectitude and magnanimity in one's attitude toward one's fellow men, whether close at hand or at the antipodes, becomes a passion. Nothing short of an actively outreaching good will to other men in such practical matters as money and privilege and pleasure seems worthy at all. Utter faithfulness always to that greater Self which is latent in the lesser Self with which one is too, too sadly familiar becomes the soul's necessity. And with that necessity lives another: the necessity of unforgetting and unwavering faithfulness to that same spiritual nature in every person one meets, so that he, too, may be helped to hear the call of the Eternal Spirit more clearly, to understand the meaning of that call, and to give himself to it with glorious abandon.

These are things that lift one up from pettiness in daily living to greatness of adventure as he pegs his onward way. And for the cultivation of them there is help. One of the finest bits of radiance in all the world's teaching is that word about the Spirit of Truth which shall guide into all the truth souls that will give themselves to such guidance; and another is the teaching about the Spirit of Power. In those words is greatest courage and joy for the soul that hungers for life that is real. Opening itself wide, and ever wider as the days go by, to the Spirit of Truth, that soul will enter progressively into knowledge of the truth, and increasingly the truth will enter into it. That soul, living now in this world, will find itself at the same time living more consciously with universals and eternals. It will find itself more truly living.

Let a soul give itself to such relations, and then becomes it the business of life to manifest that illustrious relationship in all the doings and judgments and utterances and reactions of daily existence. Other men may do as they will: it is his task, the task of that soul, without parade but with simple straightforwardness, to make it plain that not as an American first of all has he a point of view to give the world, not as a white man or a black man or a red man or a yellow man, not as a business man or a laboring man,

not as a young man or an old man, but as a man who is living under a high dedication. In his intercourse with other souls he will stay not always on the level of triviality, but will adventure up to the levels of real significance. In his dealings with himself he will adventure his mind with the great books, the great thinkers, and not confine himself to the petty. He will train himself to find his amusement in things that lead to the real values of life, and not just in those that are mere time-consumers. In his work he will take for his pacemaker the greater craftsmen and not the lesser. He will know that it is better to be ambitious for an education than for a degree, for results than for rewards, for realities than for appearances.

The life of the idealist is bound to be one of pain. First of all he longs for perfection in himself, and because the old ugliness is so hard to be rid of his days again and again are darkened with bitterness. He looks at people with longing, and wants to see them rising up to what they might be, and because so many seem content to give themselves over to that which is futile, he is made to suffer. He longs passionately for beauty, beauty of things and beauty of souls, and because there is so much absolutely unnecessary unloveliness in the world, heartache is set for his portion.

But if he who takes the ideal for his beloved companions with the cross, he companions also with joy. Beauty, wherever he does find it, thrills him with poignant delight. Longing for a perfection such as never yet was, but which he believes must come because he believes in God, he gives himself with a zest to life's greatest adventure, the adventure of the soul, and follows it high-heartedly whatever the vicissitudes through which it may lead. And deep in his soul joy lives continually because he knows that, making himself a partner of the everlasting God, the everliving Christ, the ever-near creative Spirit of love and truth and joy and life, he is making himself a partner of everlasting victory and everlasting greatness, and a sharer in those sovereign possessions.